DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 299 631 CS 506 421

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TITLE Standardized Tests as a Measure of Value-Added to Communication Students.
PUB DATE Nov 88
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (74th, New Orleans, LA, November 3-6, 1988). Printed on colored paper.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Higher Education; Speech Communication; *Speech Instruction; *Standardized Tests; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Value Added Testing

ABSTRACT

Standardized tests can be a valuable part of a value-added assessment package which attempts to determine what students gain from the college experience in general, and from communications courses in particular. The critical issues concerning assessment center around who will evaluate what skills and values with which instruments. Within the communication discipline, standardized tests such as the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI) and the College Outcomes Measures Program (COMP) can make a valuable contribution to these efforts by helping to demonstrate the "value-added" by a course or curriculum in quantifiable statistical terms. Such standardized tests do not, however, respond to all the problems associated with assessment. Their administration is costly in terms of money, time, and effort. There is also no consensus within the discipline that these instruments actually measure the critical knowledge and skills students ought to possess. An externally mandated and monitored assessment model may well reduce instructional planning to "teaching to the test." It is up to the professionals in the discipline to ensure that standardized tests are not the only tools employed to assess what students need, know, and learn in communication courses. Such tests, along with other assessment measures, can help practitioners demonstrate the quality of students' educational experience to colleagues, students, administrators, and an interested public. (Thirty-three references are attached.) (SR)

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STANDARDIZED TESTS AS A MEASURE OF VALUE-ADDED TO COMMUNICATION STUDENTS

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A Paper Presented at the 1988 Convention
of the Speech Communication Association
New Orleans
November 3, 1988

CS506441

STANDARDIZED TESTS AS A MEASURE OF VALUE-ADDED

TO COMMUNICATION STUDENTS

> "Because teaching-learning is a complex process that focuses on student learning, the teacher must be concerned with student capabilities, instructional objectives, selection of appropriate teaching strategies, accurate evaluation, and monitoring of the system (Brooks and Friedrich, 1973).

A radical new educational approach? Not really. When Brooks and Friedrich made that statement fifteen years ago they were building on the work of earlier educational theorists and practitioners. Educational psychologists had been encouraging teachers to assess the behavior and abilities and performance of their students at the beginning and ending of instructional units for at least a decade. In our own discipline, Robinson and Kerikas (1963) were telling speech teachers that "the real challenge to both student and teacher lies in some evaluation, at least, of improvement as a result of experience and training" (p. 253). While the idea for assessing the growth of students most certainly is not new within at least parts of the educational community, it seems to be the current panacea for curing the various ills which society perceives in higher education. The doctors in this public drama are the legislatures and governors who control funding for these institutions and the new miracle drug is <u>value-added assessment</u>.

<u>Mandated Value-Added Assessment?</u>

A radical new educational approach? Not really. This conception of assessment, however, has been of particular interest to the National Governors' Association since they declared it "their central strategy for improving the quality of undergraduate education" in 1986. A survey recently conducted by this Association discovered that "all but 14 states

have either instituted assessment requirements or are considering them" for colleges and universities. (Blumenstyk, August 10, 1988). Several states are directly tying dollars to assessment with performance-based funding and bonus incentives. The primary model for educators and legislators interested in this approach has been the value-added assessment program at Northeast Missouri State University. Sounding very much like the president of General Motors, the president of NMSU stated that "Quality control is the top issue in higher education today." (Jaschik, October 2, 1985).

While I am not so sure it is or ought to be the "top" issue in higher education today, I do believe it is an issue which deserves our attention for sound educational reasons. Since it is currently being championed by various governmental bodies which control funding for higher education, it is an issue which demands our attention for sound financial reasons. With the governor of Missouri chairing the National Governors' Association's five year campaign to improve education at all levels, we can expect to see even more information on the institution-wide program at Northwest Missouri State University as additional states move to mandate programs which assess what students learn in college. Perhaps the Missouri state motto--<u>the show me state</u>--will become the rallying cry for higher education and old Missouri license plates will become collector's items for educators across the nation.

It should be obvious by now that I have some serious reservations about a legislatively mandated program of assessment. Such programs are nearly always reductive. As the president of Northeast Missouri State University stated, "With value-added assessment, the fad courses are declining and the basics, the fundamental building blocks, are

returning." (Jaschik, October 2, 1985). While it is difficult to argue against basic education, it is not difficult to imagine that mandated assessment programs across an institution could significantly alter the mission and approach of a university. If educators must assess and demonstrate student growth to the satisfaction of those who provide funding for the institution, it is probable that they will concentrate on areas where specific student growth can easily be demonstrated and quantified at the expense of a broader liberal arts curriculum.

The problems accompanying assessment of student learning certainly are not new. Educators have always been concerned the reliability and validity of assessment in the classroom. Because value-added assessment puts such a premium on the initial and final performances of the student, we must be primarily concerned with the agreed upon values which will be assessed. Who decides what will be tested? Who decides which content is most important? Who decides which oral and written skills are most valuable? Who decides how these skills will be measured and evaluated? The 1988 report from the National Governor's Association argues that "it is essential that states maintain the pressure to assess, despite the many vocal arguments against it" and simply <u>recommends</u> "that state leaders involve faculty members and administrators in defining the goals for what undergraduates should learn" (Blumenstyk, August 10, 1988). Deciding who will determine the goals and values for the academic curriculum may present critical confrontations in some states. While those who champion the value-added model encourage faculty and administrators to use student surveys, alumni surveys, and locally produced tests and examinations to assess growth, there is a strong presumption on the use of nationally normed instruments to assess the actual value which was added to students

as a result of a particular instructional unit. The football mentality, the desire to prove that we are better than everyone else in the conference or better than institutions in other states, will be difficult to overcome in some cases.

Use of Standardized Tests to Assess Communication Skills

The remainder of this paper will deal specifically with the use of standardized tests as a measure of value-added to communication students. Some institutions have decided that the easiest way to measure growth is to use instruments which are currently being used for other purposes. Institutions which require ACT or SAT examinations for admission, for example, could regard those scores as pretests and administer the same tests periodically throughout the student's career. Other traditional assessments such as teacher certification exams, comprehensive exams, "rising junior" exams, or graduate or professional school admissions tests could be used at various times during a student's career to identify growth resulting from college instruction (Astin and Ayala, 1987). If we are interested in assessing the value added by communication skills instruction or performance courses, however, two specific instruments seem most appropriate: the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI) developed by Rebecca Rubin and the tests contained in the College Outcomes Measures Program developed by researchers in the American College Testing Program. Both instruments ask students to prepare and present oral messages. Both have been tested and administered sufficiently to offer acceptable reliability and validity.

The Communication Competency Assessment Instrument measures students' speaking, non-verbal, and listening skills. The instrument was developed around the competencies outlined in the Speech Communication

Association's "SCA Guidelines: Speaking and Listening Competencies for High School Graduates." While it was designed specifically "to provide a measure of students' readiness for upper-level college coursework, i.e., their abilities to speak, listen, and relate to others both within the college classroom setting and outside classroom contexts (with advisors, peers, etc.)" (Rubin, Communication Competency Assessment Instrument, 1982, p. iv.), it could conceivably be used within a value-added assessment model for assessing student growth in speaking and listening within a relevant speech course or across a curriculum.

Rubin cautions against examining scores on individual items for determining levels of competence within those specific skill areas, however, which may diminish the usefulness of this instrument for determining student growth in particular rhetorical skills. In addition, as Cooper points out, the testing procedure is expensive and time-consuming to administer and assess (1987). This assessment instrument also requires that raters be trained at each institution where it is used. Differences could clearly exist between raters from different institutions which presents some problems if administrators wish to compare their students to those at comparable institutions or regional or national norms. Neither Rubin nor the Speech Communication Association, it should be noted, make any claims regarding nationally normative data resulting from this instrument. It is an excellent instrument for its intended purpose and it would seem to be very appropriate for assessing growth in communication skills in a value-added model.

The College Outcomes Measures Program, developed by researchers at the American College Testing Program, offers a wide battery of assessment instruments for use across the curriculum. These tests are "clearly the

most popular instrument currently used" for "assessing the effects of the 'general education' part of the undergraduate curriculum" (Astin and Ayala, 1987, p. 48). Of particular interest for us, obviously, are the writing and speaking portions of this assessment package. Although I am sympathetic to Cooper's argument against using the test because speech professionals did not develop it (p. 55), it is a less than compelling reason for dismissing the instrument. If an institution plans to institute a value-added model across the its curriculum, it would be appropriate to consider the COMP materials as an assessment tool. During the last decade nearly five hundred colleges and universities have used the tests and services of the College Outcome Measures Program (Steele, 1988).

The COMP assessments of speaking and writing are defined as the ability to communicate about social institutions, science and technology, and the arts. Written and audiotaped stimuli are used as a context for role-playing tasks in which participants write letters to friends, legislators and administrators or speak to friends, informal and formal meetings. Thus three writing samples and three speaking samples are obtained in a variety of realistic contexts. In COMP materials, equal emphasis in both speaking and writing assessment is given to rhetorical concerns (discourse or organization), psychological concerns (making contact with and attending to the perspective of the audience), and practical concerns (such as using vivid language and illustrations, to dramatize and create an effect). Little emphasis is given to formal efforts such as mispronounced or misspelled words and pausing or punctuation, unless they noticeably detract from or obscure the message. These criteria are qualitatively scaled, to allow a norm-free judgment of the overall effect of a speech or essay (Trank and Steele, 1983).

The students' speeches and essays can be scored by faculty at the testing institution or by personnel at the American College Testing Program. ACT provides the assessment instrument and samples for rater training should an institution decide to score them locally. ACT will also re-score a sample of the assessments to ensure rater reliability. The COMP assessment instrument offers three important benefits to institutions adopting a value-added model of assessment. First, it provides a faculty with diagnostic information about the rhetorical skills of the students who have taken the writing and speaking subtests. It also provides comparisons of the group of students taking the tests with other various groups from the nearly 500 participating institutions. Third, the technical expertise and experience of the consultants at ACT are a part of the package of information, assistance and statistical data an institution receives throughout the process of assessment.

An Application of the COMP Tests

We used the COMP writing and speaking tests to assess changes in our students' writing and speaking skills over a period of a semester of Rhetoric at the University of Iowa. We used these particular tests because they appeared to assess rhetorical skills we taught in the course and because they offered national norms for comparisons of our students with other groups of students. The study answered the two central questions which guided our research. First, we demonstrated that students' writing and speaking skills can be measured reliably and validly. Second, we discovered what kinds of changes occurred in our students' writing and speaking skills over the period of a semester in Rhetoric (Trank and Steele, 1983).

The study demonstrated that our students' skills in writing and speaking, as measured by these instruments, increased over the semester.

The gain in speaking for the total group of students tested was significant at the .03 level while the slight gain in writing for the total group of students was not significant. Looking at the components of the two assessments, we discovered that the gains in writing were made in the area of Audience. No gains were demonstrated in the areas of Organization or Language. Gains approaching the .05 level of significance were demonstrated on all three components of the speaking assessment. While the total group of students gained on the total communication (writing and speaking) skills assessment, most of that gain was attributed to the significant increase on the speaking assessment. Had value-added been such a popular buzz word six years ago, we certainly could have demonstrated, statistically, the value which had been added to our students. But it was not, and we had to rely on mundane terms like "gains" to describe the outcome of the study.

More importantly for us, however, we were able to discover through an analysis of the results by entering skill level which groups of students were making gains. The students who came to the course with the lowest scores on the pretest made the most significant gains over the semester on both the writing and speaking assessments. Students in the middle group made slight gains in speaking. The students in the upper level group either stayed essentially the same or demonstrated a loss on all assessment categories over the semester (Trank and Steele, 1983, 230-232). Equating a middle score on the assessment instrument with a grade of C, we were also able to identify the number of students who were at a minimum level of proficiency in speaking and writing on the pretest and the posttest.

Must We Assess Student Skills?

This study demonstrated that when relevant variables are identified,

relationships among those variables and actual student growth in speaking and writing competence can be reliable and validly assessed using standardized tests. Hopefully, few would argue with this point but the issue is not necessarily resolved. Cooper reminds us that communication is a process and sensibly argues that "the focus on product assessment is not enough" (1987, p. 55). Our colleagues in English departments have been considerably more vocal in their opposition to the assessment of students' writing skills. As White notes, "Some of the more extreme partisans of recent writing theories argue too loudly that 'writing is a process, not a product' and hence confuse the issue. Writing is, as every sensible person knows, a product (in most cases) as well as a process" (1985, p. 88). The same is obviously true of oral communication and teachers of writing and speaking must be able to view writing and speaking as process and product. Both process and product can and should be analyzed and evaluated. If educators fail to examine the process, how can they know what students need or make decisions about appropriate instructional strategies in the classroom? If educators fail to examine the products students generate, how can they know whether their instruction, the experience, and/or the course has been beneficial for the students?

Arguing that communication is a process and therefore cannot be adequately assessed by any sort of testing procedure is simply not an acceptable response to the various communities which have an interest in what we do. White points out that institutions and faculties have been asked to justify huge institutional, state, and national expenditures on writing programs and warns that "outsiders using uninformed or (as one all-purpose evaluator puts it) 'goal-free' evaluation will evaluate writing programs if writing teachers are unwilling or unable to participate

in more responsible program evaluations" (1985, p. 5). More recently, Lawton argues that we could save billions of dollars by abolishing required composition courses since "no reliable evidence has been presented to show that teaching English composition over 15 or even 30 weeks produces a statistically valid justification for composition courses." A professor of linguistics and English, Lawton concludes that by doing so we could "then focus on higher education and stop playing games using overtrained Ph.D.'s and first-year graduate students to teach courses which are both inappropriate and ineffective at the college level" (Lawton, September 21, 1988). Most of us who work in the basic course area have heard similar arguments directed at basic communication courses, frequently coupled with concerns about the tremendous drain of departmental and institutional resources associated with running such a program. The salary budget for teaching assistants to teach the basic course at the University of Iowa, for example, is well over a million dollars. The colleges which require and fund this course have a right to know what students gain from this course. The value-added model is one way of gathering that knowledge.

"The overriding issue in choosing to use any test is a judgment of its relevance and 'fit' with selected outcomes of the institution's programs (Steele, 1988, p. 8). While colleges and universities have been willing to accept ACT and SAT scores as indicators of high school preparation and potential for success at the post-secondary level for decades, no such instruments have existed for assessing the general outcomes of the college experience for students other than specific examinations required for admission into graduate schools. Students are expected to gain the appropriate knowledge and skills in college by successfully completing specific courses. Few courses currently require students to pass

proficiency examinations at the end of the course. If a student receives a passing grade in Rhetoric, for example, that student has fulfilled the general education requirement and is certified as being a competent communicator on the basis of that grade. Using standardized tests within a value-added assessment model of education to determine competence or to measure gains in student knowledge and skills would be a major change from the way college and university educators and administrators have traditionally viewed their world.

Conclusion

Whether we assess our students is not the question. We obviously do in many ways. In addition, employers, our colleagues and the general public have always been eager to evaluate and comment on the communication skills of our graduates. The critical issues concerning assessment center around who will evaluate what skills and values with which instruments. Within the communication discipline, standardized tests such as the COMP and CCAI can make a valuable contribution to these efforts. They can help us demonstrate the "value-added" by a course, curriculum, or plan of study in quantifiable statistical terms. They do not, however, answer all the questions nor respond to all the problems associated with assessment. They are costly in terms of money, time, and effort to administer. They do not necessarily measure the extent to which students meet the goals and objectives of particular courses, departments or institutions. The obvious problems of student motivation, difficulties with test interpretations, and the need for a large data base for comparisons with standardized tests must also be considered. There is no consensus within the discipline that these instruments actually measure the critical knowledge and skills our students ought to possess. An

externally mandated and monitored assessment model may well reduce our instructional planning to "teaching to the test."

It is equally clear, however, that standardized tests can be a valuable part of a value-added assessment package which attempts to determine what students gain from the college experience. It is up to the professionals within the discipline to ensure that it is not the only tool employed to assess what students need, know, and learn in communication courses. Combined with student and alumni surveys, locally produced curriculum and examinations, and continued research into the process of human communication, they can help us provide an even better educational experience for students. They, along with other assessment measures, can also help us demonstrate the quality of that experience to colleagues, students, administrators, and an interested public.

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